



POLITICS + GOVERNMENT

## In this Kansas town, an insular Catholic sect leaves some residents feeling left out

The Society of Pius X has transformed life over the four decades it has had a presence in St. Marys

BY: **RACHEL MIPRO** - JULY 11, 2024 3:55 AM



📷 Sunday services at the Immaculata, recently finished after years of effort and fundraising by members of the Society of St. Pius X, draw large crowds. The massive church is symbolic of SSPX's towering influence in the area. (Thad Allton for Kansas Reflector)

Shops selling Bibles, crosses and modest garb line the main street, where parents stroll by with their children. American flags dangle to showcase patriotism. There are homes with manicured lawns and shade trees, and parks to play. And on the northern edge of St. Marys stands a 66,400-square-foot church, towering over the town.

The conservative Catholic sect that built the church has transformed life here since its arrival more than four decades ago. The Society of St. Pius X, also known as SSPX, rejects many modern ways of living, requiring modest dress for women, enforcing strict divisions between genders and encouraging large families. As members of the group have gotten into political leadership, they've imposed those beliefs, jettisoning books that mention LGBTQ+ people from the public library and shutting down a municipal swimming pool.





📷 Mark Moser, a Society of St. Pius X parishioner, answers questions during an interview in the cry room that overlooks the sanctuary of the Immaculata Church in St. Marys. Moser regularly leads tours of the church for visitors from all over the country. (Sherman Smith/Kansas Reflector)

Parishioners highlight the increasing population as a direct link to the church, and they value an insular life. But for residents who fall outside the fold, the Society of St. Pius X's presence is oppressive.

For residents devoted to the SSPX faith like Mark Moser, life in St. Marys is carrying out the society's mission.

"It's about Catholicism, and following the methods that have been used for centuries," said Moser, who moved to the town in the early 1980s and now serves on its recreation board. "It was the society that God put in place to continue the tradition of the church."

Church officials didn't respond to interview requests for this story. Church officials directed questions to spokesman James Vogel, the editor of St. Marys-based Angelus Press, which publishes Catholic literature. Vogel did not respond to calls or voicemails left at his cellphone and business' phone, or a text message follow-up. Phone inquiries with SSPX's U.S. district headquarters in Platte City and in-person and phone inquiries at the St. Marys church office were redirected to Vogel.

While attempting to reach Vogel in-person at Angelus Press, an SSPX priest coincidentally in the bookstore said he could not be interviewed without approval from church authorities.





📷 Many believers drive to St. Marys over the weekends to attend sermons at the Immaculata, recently finished after years of effort and fundraising by members of the Society of St. Pius X. (Thad Allton for Kansas Reflector)

## Inside versus outside

The late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre founded SSPX in 1970 following changes from the Vatican aimed at modernizing the church. The society arrived in St. Marys in 1978, buying a collection of historical buildings formerly owned by Jesuits and starting St. Mary's Academy and College.

By 2023, it had finished construction of the \$42 million structure named Immaculata. The largest SSPX-built church in the world, the structure features brickwork made to look like limestone, two bell towers and a gold-coated Virgin Mary statue positioned to peer down on the town below.

Since SSPX established itself here, the town population has seen steady growth. Census figures show it's now home to about 2,800 people – a 50% jump since 1980 and a sharp contrast to declining populations in other rural Kansas communities.

That growth – and the church's draw from surrounding communities – is evident during a Sunday service at the Immaculata.

Morning light bathes rows of families filling the wood pews that set up more than

1,500, while others form a long line down the side of the 12-story church, waiting to step into the confessional and unburden their sins. Chapel veils, mostly white, dangle fringe over the women and girls' faces. With many toddlers and babies in attendance, little heads pop up over the pews.

But outside the church walls, tension arises.



📷 The public swimming pool in St. Marys, once a historic community amenity, has been closed and filled in. Rock and gravel now mark the spot. (Thad Allton for Kansas Reflector)

Hannah Stockman, who grew up in the St. Marys area and moved to town in 2020, refers to herself and other residents who aren't part of the society as "townies."

She motions to the houses around hers to point out that all of her neighbors attend SSPX services. Once, she said, other girls from the neighborhood came into her yard to confront her stepdaughter over a Pride T-shirt.

"It's hard to fit in unless you go to SSPX," Stockman said. "And then there's the townies, who kind of all just stay isolated in their own home."

Stockman helped organize efforts to save the [Pottawatomie Wabaunsee Regional Library in 2022](#), when the SSPX-dominated city commission debated pulling the

library's lease over its refusal to accept a "morality clause" and remove all material that could be viewed as socially, racially or sexually divisive, including all LGBTQ+ content.

Many non-SSPX residents were afraid to oppose the church, Stockman said, and she described their thought process as: "We stand up, then we will lose our business. Or, if we stand up, my husband will lose his job. Or, if we say something in opposition, there's a whole array of fear."

In 2023, the city commission succeeded in forcing the library to remove LGBTQ+ books for youths from the library. While commissioners have no governing power over the library, the branch would be forced to find a new location if the lease weren't renewed, giving up a community spot it has held for decades.

Library director Judith Cremer, who has commuted to work in St. Marys from Topeka for 20 years, said community relations had settled down since then.

"We've always tried to be very welcoming to everybody that walks in the door," Cremer said. "That's always been my stand, and that's how we run the library. It's hard to be neutral in this world. But we try the hardest we can. We don't take any sides. And we don't turn anybody away. And we also don't make them feel like they don't belong."





📷 Judith Cremer, director of the public library in St. Marys, works long hours as she attempts to fill several open library positions. Cremer says community relations have improved since last year's tension over the library lease. (Thad Allton for Kansas Reflector)

Moser acknowledged his church is sometimes at odds with people who aren't a part of it. But he also recognized the political advantages his group holds.

“Who’s going to win? The one with the most numbers,” Moser said. “That sounds way too simplistic. And I don’t mean to just boil it down to that, because I’ve lived here forever and I know lots and lots of town people that are just the best people ever.”

Moser has served on the municipal recreation board for more than 30 years. He said all of his fellow board members are SSPX-associated. The entire city commission is made up of SSPX members, including Francis Awerkamp, who also represents the area in the state House. His family’s business, the Onyx Collection, is a prominent employer in St. Marys. Awerkamp did not respond to Kansas Reflector inquiries made through phone and email.

The town’s non-SSPX residents were alarmed in recent years over the shutdown of the community’s golf course and swimming pool. Residents said SSPX members were concerned about immodest swimsuits and golf skirts and people of different

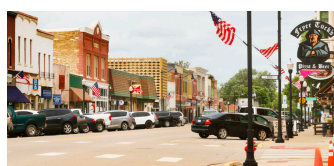
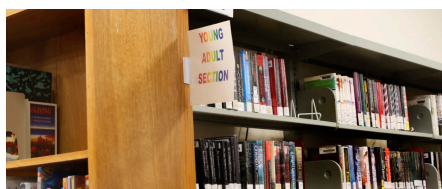
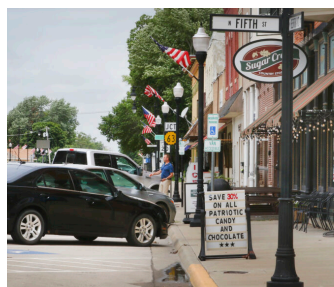
genders interacting.

Lack of modesty was a factor in the closures, Moser acknowledged, but so were the costs to maintain and repair the pool, which opened in the 1920s.

With deterioration and no “feasible option for a lasting repair,” according to city commission documents, the commission permanently closed the pool in 2021.



📷 The main street in St. Marys has restaurants and plenty of shopping options for religious literature and modest dresses. (Thad Allton for Kansas Reflector)



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